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ABSTRACT

This booklet is intended to help parents and students better understand the nature of learning disabilities at the college level and to help faculty and staff involved with learning-disabled students in higher education programs. The personal story of a female college student with a learning disability appears on the left-hand side of each two-page section, and general information related to her experience appears on the right-hand side. The booklet describes common problems of learning-disabled college students, student characteristics, the diagnostic process, developing a learning profile that illuminates strengths and weaknesses, understanding the diagnosis, individualized educational plans, and notes and suggestions for faculty. A list of 17 additional resources is provided. (JDD)

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COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

A Student's Perspective

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DePaul University

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COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES
A Student's Perspective

What is it like to be a college student with a learning disability? This booklet tries to answer that question, and is organized around the personal story of a college student, Laura Segal, class of '85. Laura's story appears on the left side of each two-page section of this booklet. General information related to her experience follows on the right side.

Through her own description of what learning was like for her in high school and college, we begin to understand what it means to have a learning disability. It means that incoming or outgoing information often becomes fuzzy or scrambled as it is processed by the brain, making learning difficult. Of course, all of us have difficulties now and then processing information. For example, there are days when concentrating and attending seem nearly impossible. Or we may have occasional difficulty retrieving a specific word, even though it is "on the tip of our tongue." In learning disabled individuals, however, these and other processing problems are so pronounced that they become a disabling handicap, one which significantly interferes with academic or social development.

It is only recently that people have begun to understand the frustrating and persistent nature of learning disabilities in college students. Previously, highly intelligent students with learning disabilities who enrolled in college tended to drop out because of a lack of understanding and assistance. This booklet has been written to help both faculty and staff involved in such programs as well as parents and students better understand the nature of learning disabilities at the college level. A list of additional resources is available at the end of the booklet.

"I have a learning disability . . .

"Looking back on my high school years, I can see that my behavior and characteristics were a direct result of a still undiagnosed specific learning disability. My family and friends occasionally questioned why I valued my school work so highly that doing homework always took priority over relaxing and enjoying a balanced social life. I claimed that I wanted to suck out each possible droplet of knowledge because learning was fulfilling unto itself; but I became a serious student very early because, due to my unidentified impairment, learning was demanding, requiring intense concentration and hard work on my part.

"Although at the time I was unaware of the fact, many of my study techniques were very unusual. For example, I made tapes in order to memorize French vocabulary words. Now I understand that I was unconsciously compensating for my weaker visual mode by using my strong auditory memory.

"Many unanswered questions bobbed up and down in my head daily. Why was I a slow reader and weak writer yet extremely competent at math and science? Although I tried to rationalize that we all have strengths and weaknesses, I still felt frustrated constantly over these discrepancies. Why was I different from my bibliophile friends? I hated reading books and never read the newspaper.

"Finally, I was an overachiever, caught in a workaholic cycle due to low self-esteem. Operating under great stress and anxiety, I felt I had to earn good grades to prove my self-worth. At last, I realized that my nervous system was alerting me to a specific problem causing my difficulties; my palms sweat and I anxiously bit my nails as I forced myself to read my book.

"Although I did well in high school, college was considerably different, since the demands on reading and writing were so much greater."

COMMON PROBLEMS OF LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS

As Laura's story illustrates, many times students do not recognize that they have learning disabilities. They may have been called lazy, or been afraid that they were just "dumb." Or they may have lived with considerable frustration and anxiety through grade school and high school, not understanding why some things were so very difficult, when others were so easy.

Students with learning disabilities usually have areas of difficulty that are in marked contrast to other areas where they excel. Some may learn well through lectures, but have extreme difficulty reading. Others may express themselves very well orally, but spell or write very poorly. Each person possesses a unique combination of strengths and weaknesses. The deficits all have a negative impact on learning and can interfere in a variety of ways. For example, a visual perceptual deficit may interfere directly with reading, and indirectly with the development of other skills such as writing. LD students, although they have average or above average intelligence, may experience problems in one or more of the following areas: reading, spelling, written expression, math, oral language, study skills, or social skills. Often, learning disabilities are inconsistent, causing problems one day, but not the next. They may cause problems in only one specific area, or they may surface in many areas.

The causes of learning disabilities are still not clearly understood, but they are presumed to be the result of neurophysiological dysfunction. Nevertheless, it is important to note that once students begin receiving appropriate services, they then begin learning strategies to compensate for or overcome many of these difficulties.

It is also important to understand what learning disabilities are *not*. They are not forms of mental retardation or emotional disorder, and they are not the result of cultural or ethnic differences. Students who are underprepared, or come from a different language background, may have some of the same problems with spoken or written language, but these problems are not the result of a processing deficit and thus such students are not learning disabled.

"I found college difficult . . .

"In registering for classes each quarter, I dodged courses with an extensive reading load because I knew that I would drown in them. Since I read at a snail's pace and printed matter was too scrambled and confusing to me, I became caught in a cycle of psyching myself out; I developed a negative attitude, believing that I could never understand all my assigned reading before the course ended.

"As I read, each point seemed as important as every other one since I was unfamiliar with the concept of a main idea in a paragraph or chapter. As a result, I became bogged down in details. Textbook reading overwhelmed me since my mind couldn't possibly retain information if I tried to absorb it all at once placing equal weight on each sentence.

"When I went to my professors for help because I felt I couldn't write a paper, they just told me to relax and not to worry because I had good ideas judging from class discussions in which I participated. They had faith in me and urged me to 'just write down' my ideas. To me, however, this was an insurmountable task. Feeling threatened and lacking weapons for battle, I developed a defeatist attitude and my goal became simply turning in something, anything, on the due date.

"Math, one of my strengths, came easily to me. I was also very coordinated at folk dancing. To learn a new dance, I needed only to feel the music flow through my body. It seemed to send instructions to my feet and arms in a subconscious code. The free and seemingly automatic manner in which I learned in some areas, such as math and dancing, contrasted with the tremendous, conscious effort and amount of time that it took me to succeed in other subjects.

"Because of my visual perceptual problems, my notes were extraordinarily messy and incomplete. I had trouble studying effectively from them. At the end of a day of classes, a zillion loose notes poured out of my folders and knapsack. When I sat down to study, feeling out of control and disorganized, in a panicked, confused state, I spent a great deal of energy just trying to prepare to study. I gathered my sloppily written notes and flipped through them, trying to decode my own writing."

CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS

Typical characteristics of LD students are listed below. Of course no student has all of these problems.

Reading

- Confusion of similar words, difficulty using phonics, problems reading multisyllable words.
- Slow reading rate and/or difficulty adjusting speed to the nature of the reading task.
- Difficulty with comprehension and retention of material that is read, but not with material presented orally.

Writing

- Difficulty with sentence structure, poor grammar, omitted words.
- Frequent spelling errors, inconsistent spelling, letter reversals.
- Difficulty copying from board or overhead.
- Poorly formed letters, difficulty with spacing, capitals, and punctuation.

Oral Language

- Difficulty attending to spoken language, inconsistent concentration.
- Difficulty expressing ideas orally which the student seems to understand.
- Problems describing events or stories in proper sequence.
- Residual problems with grammar, difficulty with inflectional or derivational endings.

Math

- Difficulty memorizing basic facts.
- Confusion or reversal of numbers, number sequence, or operational symbols.
- Difficulty copying problems, aligning columns.
- Difficulty reading or comprehending word problems.
- Problems with reasoning and abstract concepts.

Study Skills

- Poor organization and time management.
- Difficulty following directions.
- Poor organization of notes and other written materials.
- Need more time to complete assignments.

Social Skills

- Difficulty "reading" facial expressions, body language.
- Problems interpreting subtle messages such as sarcasm.
- Confusion in spatial orientation, getting lost easily, difficulty following directions. Disorientation in time, difficulty telling time.

"Somehow diagnostic tests were different . . .

"About the time my frustration had become intolerable, someone suggested getting a diagnostic evaluation. I decided to give it a try. Usually academic tests failed to reflect my true intelligence, so I tended to dread taking them. Somehow, I felt differently about the diagnostic tests. I felt that some of them would let me shine in the areas where I have unusual ability. On the other hand, others would set off a red alert signal identifying my difficulty so I could better compensate for it; I felt I would know more about the way my brain functions.

"What was taking the tests like? Initially, a lot of the perceptual tests were fun; I enjoyed solving the myriad of nonverbal puzzles. But once, while taking a visual-motor test which required copying geometric designs, I recalled having seen it on a TV commercial for public awareness of learning disabilities. In disbelief, I asked myself, 'Am I actually taking these types of tests?' Another time, because of the assumptions behind a test on study habits and teacher attitudes, I felt degraded. At the time I took it, I felt it was a complete waste of time, although in the long run, the results I received during the evaluation have proved to be very beneficial to me.

"On another occasion, I refused to take the impromptu essay exam, claiming I couldn't write. My attitude toward this test certainly identified an area needing attention.

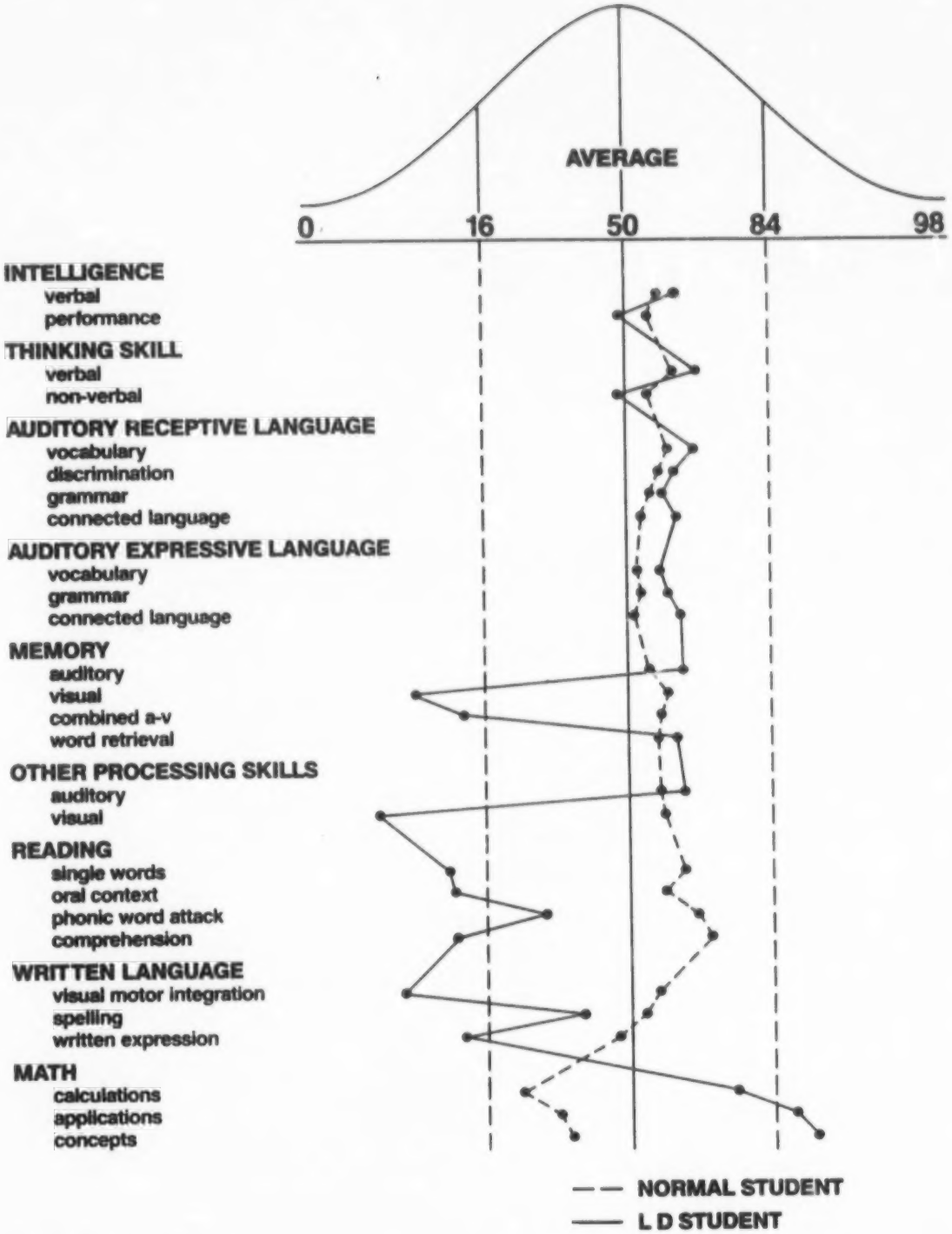
"After many long hours, answering question after question became draining, and finishing the many testing sessions was a temporary relief. Even though I was anxious to obtain my scores, I was scared to discover in what intelligence range I fell. To be defined objectively by some standard measures would leave little room for me to fantasize about my IQ."

THE DIAGNOSTIC PROCESS

If students think they may have a learning disability, they should seek diagnostic evaluation. The evaluation has two purposes. The first is the actual identification or verification of the learning disability. The second is the development of a learning profile which identifies learner strengths as well as weaknesses and makes it easier to understand how each student learns.

The first of these purposes, the actual verification of the learning disability, generally requires three phases of testing. The first phase establishes whether a student is underachieving relative to his potential, as measured by an intelligence test. By definition, students with learning disabilities must have at least average potential for achievement. The second phase of the evaluation investigates other handicapping conditions (sensory, mental, emotional) and environmental conditions (different cultural or economic background), in order to be sure that they are not the primary causes of the underachievement. The third phase of testing investigates how the student processes information and measures such abilities as auditory and visual perception, auditory and visual memory, and so on. A significant deficit in one or more of these processing areas is characteristic of learning disabilities.

Determination of a learning disability is based on these phases of testing. In other words, a learning disability is present if three conditions are met: (1) a student demonstrates underachievement in spite of having at least average potential, (2) there is no evidence of the problem being caused by another handicapping condition or by cultural or environmental differences; and (3) testing reveals one or more significant deficits in psychological processing.


AVERAGE
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OTHER PROCESSING SKILLS
auditory
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READING
single words
oral context
phonic word attack
comprehension
WRITTEN LANGUAGE
visual motor integration
spelling
written expression
MATH
calculations
applications
concepts
NORMAL STUDENT
L D STUDENT

DEVELOPING A LEARNING PROFILE

From the various diagnostic tests a learning profile is constructed which illuminates learning strengths as well as weaknesses. From this profile students can better understand how they learn, and what changes they may need to make in their study techniques. They may also discover what areas are most in need of work and what sorts of assistance or accommodation will be most beneficial.

A graph is one helpful way of visualizing the learning profile. Test scores, grouped by area of achievement, can be plotted on the graph, and interpreted with respect to a normal bell-shaped curve.

The graph on the opposite page shows the learning profile of a learning disabled student with a visual perceptual problem like Laura's, and the profile of a normal student. Note that the normal student's scores vary somewhat, indicating that we all have relative strengths and weaknesses, but that all the scores for this student fall within the normal range. In contrast, the scores of the learning disabled student show significant weaknesses, but also some substantial strengths.

"Evaluation raised new questions . . .

"Understanding the nature of my problem has been a long-term process. At first, I mostly dealt with recognizing that I am different from other students; the way I process information is unique to me. Then I tried to understand in what ways I perceived differently than others. Although the tests identified the area of weakness, they could not specifically describe what I have experienced. Because I was missing certain visual abilities, trying to understand what normal people experience was like a blind person trying to understand the concept of color. But after many years of comparing notes with LD specialists, friends, and family, the ability I am missing has become revealed to me.

"After receiving my evaluation, I was much relieved because I obtained information that I could use to begin building strategies to develop in areas that had been stunted. Absorbing, adjusting, and redeveloping a new approach to life in general would take many years. My psychological adjustment was an integral aspect of my academic success. My willingness to accept my problem was the key to my success.

"Before I decided to continue with college, I considered many alternatives. I questioned whether formal education was the best way to further myself. I questioned my identity as an intellectual. For some time, I searched for other routes. For example, I looked into experiential learning opportunities offered by cooperative education (work-study) programs. I also explored careers like nursing that would not require a graduate education entailing enormous amounts of reading and writing. Finally, I concluded that I really was college material and my previous professional career goals remained unchanged.

"After my evaluation, my first priority was to take time out to build college level reading and writing skills in order to be able to succeed in higher education. I wanted to re-enter college with a more positive attitude toward my studies. Rather than feel oppressed by my schoolwork, I desired to gain satisfaction from my studies. Only then could I be free to develop my personality."

UNDERSTANDING THE DIAGNOSIS

After the diagnostic testing, a learning disabilities specialist discusses the results with the student in order to explain their strengths and weaknesses, and to explore what the findings mean in terms of the student's educational needs and goals. Together they map out a plan specifically designed to help the student work on weak skills, capitalize on strengths, and meet course requirements.

Understandably, some students find it hard to accept a diagnosis of themselves as learning disabled. Others feel an immense relief to know that they are not just dumb or lazy. Not only do their problems actually exist but they are visible to someone else; they were not just imagining things. They are reassured by the idea that there actually is a clinical reason for the difficulty they have been experiencing – it's not their fault. In either case, adjustment to the new information is usually gradual. Some students need considerably more time than others in order to accept the idea of a learning disability and come to the decision to take advantage of the services available to them. A few may even decide they need to drop out of school temporarily to sort things out. Others may eagerly seek help, expecting that one or two terms of remediation will quickly "fix" the problem; often these students are disappointed to discover that developing their potential is a long term-process. Finally, there are those who enthusiastically seek assistance, settle in, and incorporate the guidelines worked out with the help of the specialist.

Many questions arise in the minds of students as they begin to adjust to the prospect of living with a learning disability. Most students wonder about educational alternatives, and ask how their learning disability will affect other aspects of their lives. Some consider altering their goals in favor of less demanding educational or career opportunities. However, many have found such alternatives to be ultimately unsatisfying since although easier they were not intellectually challenging.

A healthy attitude toward one's learning disability as well as toward the effort that will be required to obtain a college education is crucial for academic as well as personal development. Such adjustment and personal growth often go hand in hand with academic achievement. As students learn to improve weak areas or adjust study techniques capitalizing on how they learn best, they also begin to view using these new and changing skills as an opportunity for personal growth and strengthening oneself. Eventually, the student comes to see that making adjustments is an ongoing process which is best approached one step at a time. With appropriate academic and psychological support, students can create the opportunity for new growth and development of inner strength – not just for academic accomplishment, but also for increased satisfaction in life situations.

"Specialists gave me new insights . . .

"Working closely with my tutor gave me insight into how my mind works. As we examined my writing and discussed the difficulty I experienced, we observed that when I wrote I tried to express many ideas at once; consequently my sentences and paragraphs resembled an entangled ball of thread. We concluded that I tended to think holistically rather than analytically or sequentially. My tutor thought of a device to help me logically break down and order my ideas. By drawing a picture or using a model, I could concretely begin at one point to follow a path in a specific direction and arrive at an end point coherently. Also, to help me get over my writer's block, she suggested I use a tape recorder to initially speak my ideas aloud. That technique was useful for two years until I progressed to the point where I no longer find it necessary; now I write directly from my head.

"The ideas my tutor gave me on how to organize my notes and course work have proved invaluable to me. I now use a filing cabinet to store and organize course material. Also, color coding my notebooks for each class, as well as using colors to headline and organize my notes, have helped me organize information in my head comfortably."

INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATIONAL PLANS

What actually transpires in a one-to-one session with a learning specialist? Students may need assistance in three major areas: the updating of study and learning skills, improvement of basic skills such as reading, spelling, or writing, and development of strategies and/or materials most effective for a given student in order to improve those skills.

Updating of study skills is often needed because many college students (especially those with learning disabilities) are still studying the way they first taught themselves in earlier school years. Whether previously effective or not, those approaches can no longer support the demands of college-level material. For instance, during high school much emphasis is necessarily placed on the acquisition of facts – math facts, science facts, history facts, vocabulary for foreign languages, etc. – all of which requires an equally necessary emphasis on rote learning. However, in college courses, much emphasis is placed on conceptual thinking and absorbing whole systems of information, all of which requires approaches to learning entirely different from rote learning.

Improvement in basic skills may be necessary for many students. Often, learning disabled students at the college level find renewed enthusiasm for improving reading, spelling, and writing skills as they realize that academic and career goals require certain standards in these areas. Although specific processing deficits may still interfere, students gain satisfaction in discovering that they can become more *efficient* readers or writers.

Arriving at learning techniques most effective for an individual student is the keystone of the program. Each LD student will need to find techniques or strategies that are best suited to individual strengths and weaknesses. For example in taking notes from textbooks, one student may need to paraphrase significant ideas in a notebook, another may need to tape his or her comments and study from the tape, while another may need to color-code the text using one color for main idea and another for supporting details.

"Now I'm dealing with my hidden handicap . . .

"In facing and understanding the nature of my hidden handicap, I have had to make many adjustments. What a relief is has been to my ego to know that I was not unable, lacking intelligence, just that I was disabled. However, convincing myself that I indeed had a handicap, although invisible, was most difficult. For example, I often neglected to appreciate the additional time and energy it took me to complete assignments or write a paper, even though I was working out ways to become more efficient.

"Although the way I process information required input and output methods different from most of my classmates, I expected to learn the same information, and achieve the same end product as every other student. For example, it helped to verbalize what I read in order to comprehend it more smoothly and accurately.

"Why did I need the special arrangement of taking a test in a separate room? Since I needed immense concentration and focus, any type of distraction affected my performance on an exam. A compounded difficulty was my visual and auditory sensitivity to my entire environment. If a student asked a teacher a question, even in a whisper, my attention was interrupted. I had difficulty screening out distractions, and so they had a larger effect on me than on other students.

"Having always taken complete responsibility for my education, I had no difficulty asking professors for specific allowances to do things differently when necessary. My attitude was that teachers provide guidelines for what to learn, but it was my responsibility to take home material presented in class and learn it in my unique style. I didn't expect professors to spoonfeed me, but I did need them as a resource for me to use after I had grappled with a topic.

"Dealing with my professors has been fantastic. Almost all of them trusted my need for whatever I have asked them without skeptical questioning. They have openly invited me to do what I need in order to succeed in their class."

NOTES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FACULTY

Students in a college program will have written verification of their disability, and will be working with a specialist to take increasing responsibility for their learning. LD students may learn differently, but this does not mean that they cannot learn, or that they should expect to have standards lowered for them. These students can deal with their invisible handicap, and can cope with it or overcome it just like any physically handicapped person does. For example, a person in a wheel chair needs special access to the elevators in university buildings instead of using stairs or escalators. Similarly, an LD student may need special access to information, e.g., by tape recording a lecture instead of taking notes. In either case different means are necessary, but the same goal is reached: obtaining an education.

Some LD students may approach faculty with requests for specific modifications of procedures, but only when these are necessary. Federal law requires reasonable accommodations for the handicapped for mastery of course content, and allows LD students to use appropriate alternative methods to demonstrate their knowledge (e.g., taped exams). Of course the standards of appropriateness will vary according to the subject matter of the course, but it is generally the case that because of their handicap LD students are at a disadvantage in most exam situations before they begin. Consequently, appropriate accommodations do not give LD students an *extra* advantage, but rather allow them an *equal* opportunity to express what they have learned.

It is important to encourage LD students to use the support services available on campus. If you think a student may have a learning disability, encourage him or her to contact the campus office for special students.

In addition, the following practices are suggested, which will be of help to all of your students, but especially to LD students, in order that they function more independently and with more efficiency:

- Provide a syllabus that gives a clear and detailed explanation of expectations, topics, and procedures for each class session.
- Structure each class session with a review of previous material and an outline of current material. At the end of the class summarize important points.
- Emphasize new or technical vocabulary. Present it on an overhead projector or a handout.
- Give students ample opportunity for questions, clarifications, and review sessions.
- Offer study questions that indicate the relative importance of content as well as the format of possible test questions.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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